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Modern miners - Prospectors pan for gold in timeless Libby Creek

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By MICHAEL JAMISON / Photographed by MICHAEL GALLACHER of the Missoulian

LIBBY CREEK - Jon VanDort worked a gentle rhythm, shifting and tilting the shallow bowl with practiced ease, panning for color.

Beneath his large, sun-browned hands a thick slurry sloshed and eddied, tumbling stone and pebble over the rim, sifting and sorting and spilling muddy brown back into the creek.

Near the bottom, a sediment of sand and silicate swirled, then separated, leaving in his pan a fine film of black magnetite.

And beneath that midnight black, the color.

Gold.

"That's what you want to see," VanDort said, tapping the edge of his pan. "You want the color."

He whipped out a giant eye dropper, slung on his hip like an outlaw's six-shooter, and slurped up sparkling flakes the color of autumn sunlight. VanDort was the first human ever to lay eyes on that gold, the first to filter those flecks from their mountain of native rock.

He is a man who knows where to find what matters, and how to spot the glitter where others see only dirt.

"Gold," Mark White said, "is history."

That's because history is human, and gold is likewise a uniquely human pursuit.

Here on Libby Creek, gold's history is a web of hope and greed, of Indian battles and sourdough prospectors, of potential and promise and prayer, finally, unheeded.

White, like VanDort, is a prospector of sorts, mining the records and archives and the land itself, unearthing stories to sift what really matters. He's a U.S. Forest Service archaeologist and the unofficial historian of Libby Creek, and he, better than anyone, knows what happened here before.

A large man with a salt-and-pepper beard more salt than pepper, White knows about the great Pleistocene ice sheets, the glaciers that scraped Great Northern's mountaintop bare. He knows how shallow, precious veins were crushed and tumbled, carried off the mountain and concentrated here, not far south of Libby.

That's where the gold was found, in 1864, a full 20 years and more before the first wagon roads would penetrate this craggy range.

"It was rough," White said, "and it was remote."

Miners tried to chisel a foothold, though, and by 1867 as many as 600 were working claims at "Libbysville." But the nearest supply post was way off in Walla Walla, Wash., and the gold just didn't pan out.

"Eventually," White said, "they starved. The isolation was just too much."

"It's just the color of gold," explains Idaho prospector Dale Evans, showing off his take from the week. "When you see it, when you pick it up out of the dirt, it's so exciting. The color of gold."

Gleaming golden nuggets gild Jon VanDort's wedding ring, wet and shining, dripping with the freshly panned water of Libby Creek.

"I've always been interested," he said, in the history and the gold and the hunt. Especially the hunt.

A decade ago, when he retired from Plum Creek Timber Co., VanDort camped himself at the Libby Creek Recreational Gold Panning Area. Established in 1988, it is, White believes, the only site of its kind in the nation.

Set aside by the Forest Service, the area is open to the public - no private claims allowed. No machines or metal detectors, either. Here, it's all pan work, with the emphasis on work.

The water is ice cold, the sun hot and hard, the mosquitoes the best miners of all. In a decade of summertime searching, VanDort has packed countless buckets of dirt to the river - 65 pounds apiece - from which he's panned perhaps a couple ounces of gold.

But in those years, he's found other treasure, riches he did not expect on this lonely hill.

"The people," he said, "are fantastic. They're what keep you coming back. Them and the color."

Lucy, VanDort's beagle, is considered "mayor" of this ragtag camp, and she noses her way freely from rig to rig. Most are run by "old retired guys," VanDort said, "tougher than nails."

There's the octogenarian who still packs buckets like a teenager. There's the man who gave up a kidney for his brother. There's the guy VanDort describes as a "dwarf diabetic Dumpster diver."

They share summer's space with deer and moose and the occasional bear and they, VanDort said, "are the real gold up here."

They certainly have the color.

The second gold rush here, in 1885, rode in on rails and roads, and no longer

was Libby Creek quite so isolated. Which is not, however, to say that life was much easier.

"They mined speculators here more than they mined gold," White said. "The Libby mining district was always heavy on speculation and investment, but not much gold."

Speculation, of course, relied on what White calls "optimism," but others might call bald-faced lies.

"The Libby Placers Will Produce Millions," cried a headline from 1907. "Gold From Libby Creek Would Pay National Debt," local news claimed in 1908.

"And they did find gold," White said. "Occasionally, someone even made a profit."

It was, he said, just enough to keep the fever cooking, especially during hard economic times.

They mined into the new century, and into the pre-war teens, and on up to the Great Depression. They stripped the land with hydraulic mining, sending a mountain of sediment downstream and leaving behind hillsides of bare rock rubble.

"That," White said, "was hell on the landscape."

And it wasn't much better on the miners.

You can't ask for a more beautiful setting than the Libby Creek area. Ray

Whitehead of Calistoga, Calif., had the stream to himself during a recent midday outing.

In Chicago, where Claude Welles had enjoyed a solid middle-class life until upended by the Great Depression, the headline read "Welles Having Time of Life as Gold Miner."

He'd traveled to Libby Creek with son Leonard, and staked a claim of his own. Time of his life. But Leonard's letters home to mother told a story harsher than the headlines.

"My fingers are so cold it is hard to write. I have seven blankets on my bed, so I manage to keep warm."

There was no money for payroll, he wrote, and the team wallowed in deep snow, so supplies were packed on Leonard's back, nine long mountain miles from the wagon road to the mine site. Still, the burden beat a day in the hole.

"I'd rather be broke here than in the city. A person with a little gumption can earn a dollar or more a day. Not much, but enough to keep him going."

"I been coming here about 16 years, panning gold," 63-year-old Billie Moeller said. "I used to come here 40 years ago to fish. I just love it up here. Don't have to worry about the traffic running me down, or the phone ringing trying to sell me something I don't need."

Moeller, like Leonard Welles, would far rather be broke here than in the city.

"Put forth thy hand," Shakespeare advised. "Reach at the glorious gold."

Dale Evans shifts big boulders, the bones of the mountain, to uncover finer dirt beneath. Then he scrapes it away, carefully, patiently, an inch at a time, and runs his metal detector over the surface. Here, above the public panning area, he's working a claim held by the Northwest Gold Panning Association.

Evans is 42, and he's been prospecting full time for 12 years now, and his dad's down the hill panning with VanDort. Last summer, his dad - Biff Evans - turned an ounce a week, working an Idaho stream, and now he wears a nice nugget in his ear, like a pirate.

"This," Dale said with a nod to his detector, "is what I like to do. This is all I do."

He works Arizona in the winter, Montana and his own private Idaho claim in the summer. Dale's a man of few words, body quarried by years of stone, working eight or 10 hours a day on the hill.

"Depends on how tired I get."

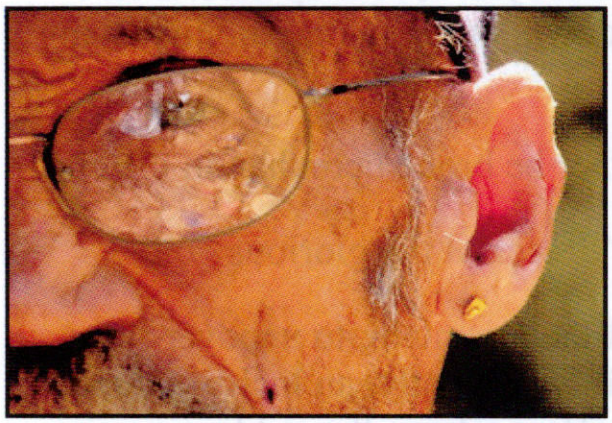
He's sold his house for prospecting gear, lives mostly in his camper, all for the thrill of the color, and the freedom of a life where the only boxes are sluice boxes.

"It's just the color of gold," Dale explained. "When you see it, when you pick it up out of the dirt, it's so exciting. The color of gold."

He says he turns his brain off while listening for the ping in his headset, doesn't wonder what he's missing on TV.

"I try to keep to myself," Dale said, "and just think about the bigger one I'm going to find."

Last year, he found a half-ouncer, a bona fide nugget amid the flakes, "and that's an adrenaline rush, right there. That's what keeps me coming back."



Biff Evans wears an earring made from gold he dug himself. "I found my first piece of gold when I was 12, and I haven't been able to give it up since," Evans says.

Between the public panning area and the private claims lies a whole lot of history. Some is obvious - big metal machines and pipelines, leftovers from the rush. Some is subtle - a hump of forest, marking an old water trench.

Mark White is keeper of that history, of "who they were, what they were like, what they did. If you don't understand what happened on the landscape before us, you're going to make a lot of mistakes."

He's spent years poring over dusty documents, and has concluded "the written record sometimes lies, but the ground never does. What we throw away really does say a lot about who we are."

And so White is working with today's prospectors to stop what he calls "the dismantlement of Montana's history."

"Our ghost towns have melted away," he warns, "and our history is being lost by people who pack it out for themselves."

But here, on this hill, modern miners still know the Howard family, the brothers who sparked the 1885 rush, and in the cool of evening they still fish Howard Lake, just a mile upstream. They sort and sift the same hillsides as those old timers, and pan the same spring snowmelt.

Sure, today's prospectors are mostly hobbyists, in it for the recreation rather than the big strike. But that adrenaline rush, that buzz when you first see the color, that's timeless. That's an old human story, a history swirling again in the circle of VanDort's gold pan.

He's brought another bucket down, and is once again knee-deep in icy cold, working the water round and round, alongside his friends, measuring his retirement one pennyweight at a time.

"It gets hold of you," Biff Evans said. "I found my first piece of gold when I was 12, and I haven't been able to give it up since.

"For me, I could care less about getting rich. I just like the hunt. It's all about the hunt. And it's a good life."

Reporter Michael Jamison can be reached at 1-800-366-7186 or at ***mjamison@missoulian.com****. Photographer Michael Gallacher can be*

*reached at (406) 523-5270 or at **mgallacher@missoulian.com**.*
